

Building a Dissertation Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: A Recent Doctoral Graduate Narrates Behind the Curtain Development

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Abstract

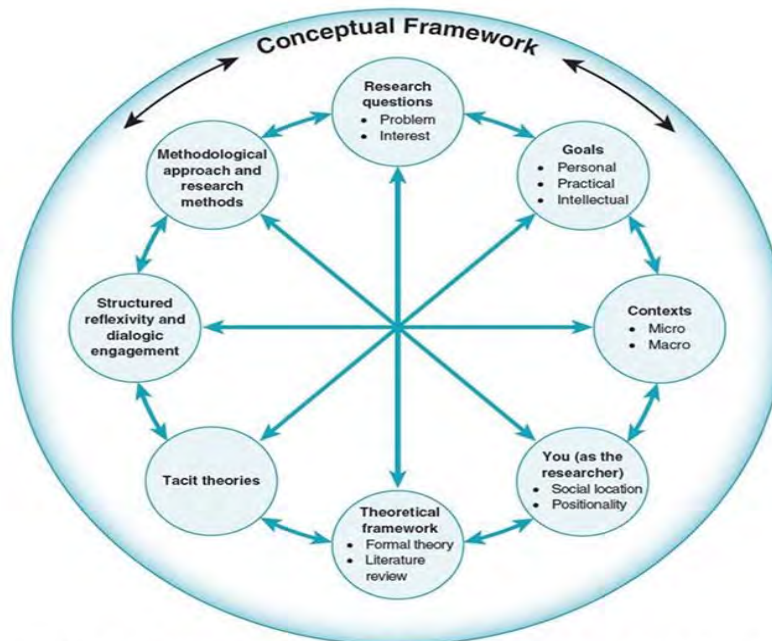
This article examines the development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks through the lens of one doctoral student's qualitative dissertation. Using Ravitch and Carl's (2021) conceptual framework guide, each key component is explored, using my own dissertation as an example. Breaking down each framework section step-by-step, my journey illustrates the iterative process that conceptual framework development requires. While not every conceptual framework is developed in the same way, this iterative approach allows for the production of a robust and sound conceptual framework.

Introduction

While progressing on my doctoral journey I struggled to learn, and then navigate, what it meant to do quality academic research. While I had worked in higher education for over 15 years when I entered into my doctoral program in Higher Education at Penn, and had earned multiple master's degrees, I felt wholly unprepared to complete a dissertation. It felt, at first, beyond my reach. Now that I have completed the dissertation, my hope is to pay it forward by sharing reflections on the process as a guide to help other researchers navigate the development of a robust conceptual and theoretical framework for their own dissertations.

My journey into this doctoral inquiry began before I even realized it. I entered the program with a strong idea of what I wanted to study but no "academic" frameworks to help me chart the journey. Little did I know that that is in fact what conceptual frameworks do, they help guide you from early ideation to a finalized study. The turning point in my own learning, let's call it an epiphany of sorts, happened in a qualitative research methods course that introduced Ravitch and Carl's *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological*. I was introduced to the basic concepts needed to turn my own research ideas into actionable research questions. While this was not the only source to guide me on this journey, conversations with peers and professionals, other courses and independent studies also moved me along, it was reading this text that gave me the academic terminology and frameworks I needed to build a robust and rigorous dissertation research design.

To guide the development of strong conceptual and theoretical frameworks I use Ravitch and Carl's (2021) components of a conceptual framework graphic (p. 38) below:



Ravitch and Carl, Qualitative Research. Copyright © 2016 SAGE Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

Using this visual of the framework as a guide, I share how I developed and used theoretical frameworks in a case study dissertation and how the development of my conceptual framework played out in my study.

Building a Dissertation Study

For context, I describe my dissertation study to bridge the theoretical with the reality of my dissertation. Seeing these ideas and terms applied in a real-world context should provide some guidance on how to address them in the construction of your own conceptual framework.

My dissertation study examined gender equity in college sports, specifically examining institutional characteristics and their potential impact on Title IX compliance. Using case study research, I examined two institutions and then contrasted them to see if there were particular characteristics about those institutions that made them more likely to comply with Title IX's three-part test. Overall, the study found that there are some institutional characteristics that impact Title IX compliance.

The evolution of a research idea into a study design is useful for understanding the impact that developing a conceptual framework has on this work. Adding the academic structure required to go from idea to fully realized conceptual framework is integral to a sound study. Going into the doctoral program I had a couple of broad ideas I wanted to bring together in a formal study. I knew I wanted to study college sports for a number of reasons including that I am a huge sports fan working in higher education who wanted to better understand the college sports context. I also wanted to integrate issues of gender disparities into my work to better understand disparities

around athletic participation between the sexes as outlined by Title IX legislation. For me, the goal was to bring these broad topics and interests together. Turning these topics into a problem my study could address was critical. Once I made this shift to problem statement, it became about transitioning from problem to research questions from which I could use to drive the potential study.

Understanding this evolution, from a research idea into a study design, is important as it speaks to the understanding the two are not the same. A researcher has to work through an iterative process in order to take a research idea, and through developing their study's conceptual framework, turn it into a study. Starting with research interests you are passionate about is important, but it is only the first step in a journey to a high-quality research study. For me this meant understanding what made my ideas important and how they could be studied. Why was gender equity in college sports important and what was causing the inequities in athletic participation between the genders? Say a bit more on this—how did you do this?

Developing Guiding Research Questions

I began with the Ravitch and Carl (2021) conceptual framework diagram as a guide, starting with the research questions positioned at the top. It's important to note that the development of research questions is an active and iterative process that evolves and changes over time. Looking back at notes I took throughout my dissertation journey, I found at least a dozen different iterations of my own research questions. Looking back at the evolution of my own research question, allowed me to see just how iterative of a process this really is. Second, developing research questions is largely about whittling down your broad ideas and interests into something that is scoped in such a way as to be doable.

For me, I started with these broad areas of interest and whittled them down from there, focusing and iterating. Next, I sought to understand the goals of my study and who the intended audiences were (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I knew I wanted to develop something that was useful for practitioners. Being a higher education practitioner myself, I wanted something people in the field could use and learn from. Knowing this was extremely important to developing the study's research questions since it helped me to map them onto the goals and audiences I imagined for the study.

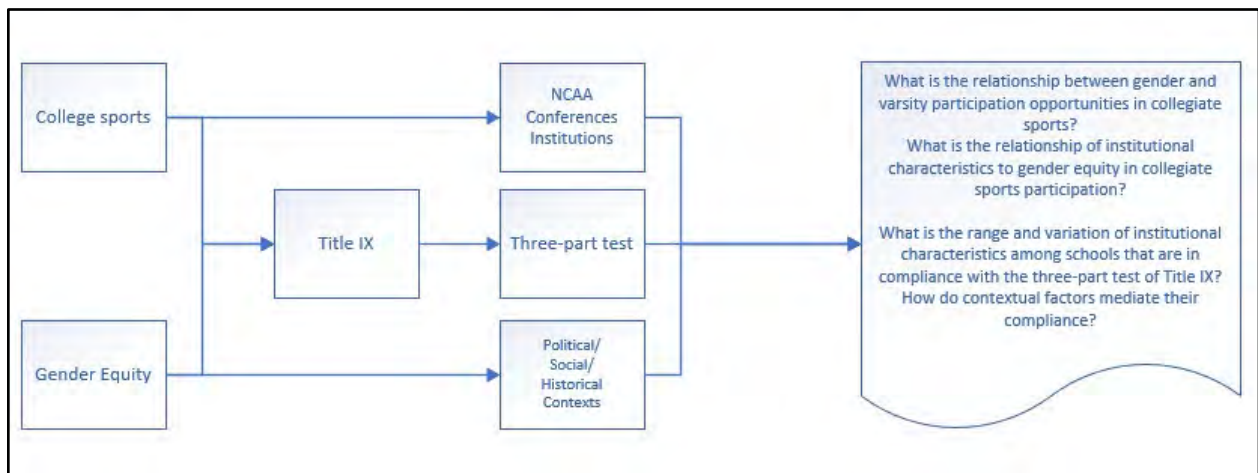
The research questions should address the problem you are trying to solve and why it's important (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For me, the goal was to explore *what was causing gender athletic participation inequities* and *how that fit into broader gender disparities in higher education and the country*.

My final research questions show how far they had come from my topics of interest.

1. What is the relationship between gender and varsity participation opportunities in collegiate sports?
2. What is the relationship of institutional characteristics to gender equity in collegiate sports participation?

Additional questions related to institutional characteristics are:

3. What is the range and variation of institutional characteristics among schools that are in compliance with the three-part test of Title IX?
4. How do contextual factors mediate their compliance?



At first these questions focused on understanding gender disparities in regards to athletic participation opportunities in college sports. I sought to understand the extent of the disparities and which institutions had them. From there I wanted to understand potential institutional characteristics that could serve as predictors of Title IX compliance. For this, I wanted to explore the impact general institutional characteristics like, undergraduate gender breakdown, might have on creating potential difficulties with navigating Title IX compliance. It was important to investigate the similarities and differences between the two cases in my study. This would help inform whether there were unique things about each institution that were having an effect on Title IX compliance at that institution. This was about understanding what is happening at each of the cases and the reason I chose the methodological approach I did.

Developing Study Goals

A study's goals are the central part of the conceptual framework as they help turn an interest or concern into a research study. Goal mapping for a study is this process that maps out, or theoretically frames the key goals of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The study's goals come from many different sources including personal and professional goals, prior research, existing theory, and a researcher's own thoughts, interests, and values (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In my dissertation study, it was a combination of all of those things, although I didn't realize it at first.

The truth is, I didn't realize I was building conceptual and theoretical frameworks at the time, but in fact I was incrementally building up to them. I talked with experts, advisors, my professors, mentors, academic peers and practitioners to slowly build my own contextual understanding of the research questions, theory, and methodology along the way.

The study goals for my dissertation emerged from multiple vantage points. I thought it was senseless that after 50 years of Title IX, schools were still ignoring the law (willfully or not). Some of the best athletes I've known have been women, including my sister. This gave me an appreciation for women's sports at an early age. From a practitioner-scholar's standpoint, I didn't see anything that was usable in "real life." At least nothing that didn't require a law degree or extensive knowledge of the law, something most people do not have. I had also come across Charles Kennedy's 2007 Gender Equity Scorecard in a prior class that gave me the idea for the compliance model. This study was designed to measure schools' compliance with various aspects of Title IX, but only examined the proportionality requirement of the three-part test (Kennedy, 2007). This was a good start because it provided a template from which to assess compliance when examining gender equity in college sports but helped me to see the need for an easy-to-understand model that covered all aspects of the three-part test that practitioners could use on their own campuses. As a way to better understand Title IX compliance among institutions I then built the compliance model that addressed the entire three-part test with a lawyer friend and used it to do an almost test run of the sampling.

Lastly, as I refined my topic, there seemed to be something missing from the literature. This missing piece gave me the idea for merging the theoretical and the practical dimensions of Title IX compliance within the context of college athletics. A compliance model, using a legal and statutory approach but also grounded in theory, that could be used by practitioners in real life. This model could then help researchers understand why Title IX non-compliance was still an issue today. For me and my study, applying this model to publicly available data, helped to understand why women athletes are not getting their fair share of athletic participation opportunities guaranteed by a law passed over 50 years ago. This process of having to seek out data, taught me the continued need for a proactive approach to measuring compliance with all the participation aspects of Title IX.

Understanding Contexts of the Work

Understanding the contexts of your intended study is critical as it helps set the stage for your study's position in the real world. Knowing the actual setting of your study and its context are important as it speaks to the micro contexts. The who and what aspects of that setting are central to your research. It is this context within the context that helps us understand the aspects that influence what we study and how we frame the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). At the micro level, my study sought to focus on the institutional structures and workings of two universities. I chose case study research because it allowed me to focus on those two institutions, and that was very

intentional, as I wanted to understand their specific institutional structures and their potential impacts on Title IX compliance.

Understanding the macro level contexts impacting my study was also important. It is the combination of social, historical, national, international, and global level contexts that create the conditions in which your study is conducted. As Ravitch and Carl (2021) state it is these broad contexts “that shape society and social interactions, influence the research topic, and affect the structure and conditions of the settings and the lives of the people at the center of your research and you” (p. 52). This has two important implications for conceptual framework development. First, it is important to investigate and thoroughly understand the setting of the study that reflects the conditions as lived by the stakeholders (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As you design your study it is important to consider what’s happening in that moment and how your study is situated in a specific moment in time which impacts both the context and setting of your study but also how you come to view and approach it (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

For my dissertation, understanding college sports and higher education in the broadest sense was important when thinking about the macro contexts influencing my study. Things like: *how does the NCAA and conferences play a role in this area? How does higher education handle gender equity in college sports as it relates to the missions of the institutions? And even more broadly, how does this study fit into broader societal structures regarding equality?* Given everything that was going on in college sports at the time (issues at the NCAA’s women’s basketball tournament, volleyball, softball), the contexts illustrated the broader need for understanding this issue in that moment of time. This illuminates the importance of taking the time to understand the different contexts impacting your study and why they are important.

Researcher Reflexivity

When thinking about social identity and positionality, it is vital to understand that the researcher is viewed as a vital part of the study itself, the primary instrument and filter of interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Positionality refers to the researcher’s role and social identity in relationship to the context and setting of the research. I think of this as what we as researchers bring to the table—who we are and what we know and how that impacts what we do and how we do it. Understanding how these aspects of oneself all interact and make me who I am, while also understanding my potential impact on my research is critical to a strong conceptual framework.

For my study, I worried about my positionality in particular: my gender and my fandom. I was worried my various identities would influence my approach negatively in ways I would be unaware of. I, someone who identifies as male, wanted to be taken seriously while addressing a gender equity issue from a privileged gender position. I also didn’t want to overlook or discount anything because of who I am and how I viewed the world of college sports. This illuminates the importance of understanding one’s identities and their potential impact on the study. There were

numerous ways I addressed this through the study including engaging my critical inquiry group, drafting memos, and using a researcher interview to elicit self-reflection.

Theoretical Framework Development

When working through the development of a theoretical framework within a conceptual framework, one must account for the integration of formal theory and the use of the literature review. Formal theory is those established theories that come together to create the frame for your research questions. The researcher must seek out formal theories to help understand what they are studying and why they are studying it (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch & Carl said this best, “the theoretical framework is how you weave together or integrate existing bodies of literature...to frame the topic, goals, design, and findings of your specific study” (p. 58).

It is important to point out that the process of creating a theoretical framework is separate from a literature review. The theoretical framework does impact the literature review and the literature review impacts it, but they are separate. You may discover theories that strengthen your theoretical framework as you review literature, and you may seek out theories to validate a hypothesis you have related to your study. This is important because your formal theories do not encompass all the theories related to your topic, but the specific theories that bind your study together and give it structure.

For my study, formal theories ended up being an equity-equality framework developed by Espinoza (2007) and a structuralism-subordination framework derived from Chamallas (1994). The equity-equality framework was used to address what I had seen as confusion between the two terms, using them interchangeably, when reviewing literature examining Title IX. I wanted to understand if the confusion about the terms, equity and equality, led to a misunderstanding about the true intent of Title IX and intercollegiate athletics. For the structuralism-subordination framework, I wanted to understand if there were institutional structures that institutions had built that led to the subordination of women. I also wanted to understand if those structures manifest themselves in ways that hinder institutions' Title IX compliance, leaving women without the participation opportunities required by law.

Both of these formal theories had an impact on and were impacted by my literature review. The structuralism-subordination framework was discovered after my initial review of Title IX literature, while the equity-equality framework was needed to reflect inconsistencies in the use of those terms in texts reviewed for the literature review. These formal theories also helped me refine my research questions and the purpose of my study. The formal theories impact on the different aspects of my conceptual framework then required me to refine and redefine by literature in order to incorporate their impact. This understanding of formal theory as the framework to construct a study is central to constructing a robust theoretical framework.

What helped me arrive at these theories in the great morass of theories was Title IX's application to college sports, feminist scholar's work related to college sports, and the use and misuse of the equity and equality in the literature.

Naming Tacit Theories

It is not just your role as the researcher that impacts your study, it is also all the informal ways in which we understand the world. We all have working hypotheses, assumptions, or conceptualizations about why things occur and how they operate (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This is a result of how we were raised and socialized which has a direct impact on the ways that we see our work and the contexts in which it takes place. For me as the researcher for this study, three tacit theories emerged upon examination through memos and dialogic engagement with peers and advisors, described in the next section. One, was related to what I call, college sports fandom or the ESPN culture. For me, I grew up on ESPN as did many of my friends. We got most of our sports news through these mediums and it greatly impacted how we viewed and thought of college sports. The problem with this is that ESPN has helped propagate many false narratives and misconceptions about college sports. A few examples include: big time college sports and programs make money (most do not), men's sports are more popular than women's (men get the majority of airtime), and college sports make a lot of money (where it gets its "money" is not where you think). There was also the continual sexualization and diminishment of women athletes.

Family dynamics also played a major role in my sports fandom and its importance. Sports were big in my family as most members played but we also watched a lot together. It was a bonding mechanism for us. For our family, my sister was our best athlete. This meant attending a lot of her games which led to an appreciation of women's sports at an early age. Lastly, I had a general lack of knowledge around gender equity in college sports, mostly related to my fandom described above. I didn't develop a true understanding until graduate school when I went out of my way to do deep dives into the topic whenever I could. This process of self-discovery and reflection with my own tacit theories teaches the importance of examining oneself, our socialization and its impact on your research. The dissertation reflection process was cathartic, it brought together these various strands of my identity, history, and interests and helped me to identify and then reckon with my unconscious biases, assumptions, and drivers.

Structured Reflexivity and Dialogic Engagement

I relied on structured reflexivity and dialogic engagement as my main reflexivity strategy, reflecting on my research through purposeful engagement with others a lot throughout my study. I went back and forth many times between different aspects of my conceptual framework as "new" information was discovered. Sometimes this reflexivity was planned, for example, after completing one part of my conceptual framework I would review other aspects to consider the impact. This would help me to ensure the potential impact of this new information was assessed

against all parts of the conceptual framework. Other times it was completely spontaneous such as an illuminating reading or discovery would spark me to think about a piece of conceptual framework differently and adjust. In one particular moment, I came across some conflicting information during one of the cases that required me to rethink aspects of my entire conceptual framework. This conflicting information indicated another approach to measuring Title IX compliance which was at conflict with mine. I met with various members of my critical inquiry group to decide on a path forward and then wrote a memo outlining what happened and the decision made. This incident caused me to not only conduct dialogic engagement but also structured reflexivity as I reviewed all aspects of my conceptual framework to ensure everything still made sense as it was structured given the new information.

The key structured reflexivity mechanisms I used in my study were memos, a critical inquiry group, a researcher interview and case reports. Each of these proved to be an invaluable resource when navigating the construction of my conceptual framework. I used different kinds of memos to highlight key decisions which were useful later when writing my dissertation.

My critical inquiry group, composed of college sports experts, peers, women's rights advocates, Title IX consultants and lawyers, had multiple functions throughout my study. They challenged me on assumptions and decision making, helped me work through challenges and served as sounding boards to bounce ideas off of. My researcher interview, which is when the researcher is interviewed to pull out tacit knowledge and assumptions, was particularly useful as it allowed for a non-biased critique to focus on process, procedure, and theory (both the theoretical and conceptual). My interviewer also called out my tacit theories and biases which were helpful in structuring that section of my conceptual framework. Lastly, I used case reports as a way to summarize my cases individually in their own distinct process guaranteeing each received a deep dive. This also allowed me to make refinements after the first case and also helped lay the groundwork for a cross-case analysis. The entire process taught me that having these structured mechanisms adds validation points and reflection opportunities from which I could refine my work.

Methodological Approach and Research Methods

For any researcher the methodological approach is guided by the study's research questions. This section is also partly shaped and derived from the conceptual framework. For some, they will arrive at the methodological approach that best fits their study along the way, picking it up from other pieces of their conceptual framework. For others, the approach is clear from the beginning and drives some of their conceptual framework decision making. For me, I arrived at my methodological approach as it became clear as my conceptual framework developed. As I worked through the interactions of my research questions, informed by my developing conceptual framework, it became clear that case study research was the right methodological approach for my study.

The methodological approach I chose for my dissertation was case study research, which made sense given that the primary goal was to gain a clear understanding of the “how” and “why” of each case, which is especially important when examining the two cases in this study (Yin, 2018). Understanding the complexities and contextual circumstances of Title IX cases is especially crucial given its real-world impact on universities (Yin, 2018). The in-depth focus of case study research allowed for a much richer understanding of the potential impacts of institutional and athletics department characteristics impacting Title IX compliance today (Yin, 2018).

I used a multi-case approach because I wanted to compare and contrast one school that was “good” at Title IX compliance and one that was not. Each case was completed separately for a deep dive and better understanding using thematic analysis for the data analysis. After each case report was completed, themes were reviewed. After both cases were completed a cross-case analysis was done to compare and contrast the cases using the themes derived from each case. For the data collection process, I used the following: archival records and documents including meeting minutes and institutional reports, memos for data collection and data analysis, dialogic engagement, and a researcher interview. My learning throughout the dissertation process illuminates the importance and generative value of using a methodological approach that aligns with the goals of the study and is guided by the research questions.

Key Takeaways

If you remember anything from this, please remember these three things:

1. Developing a conceptual framework is an iterative process. It will feel like you are constantly making changes. That’s ok. That’s what good research is, constantly evolving and getting better. My research questions looked nothing like what they started as. They evolved and were informed by newer and better research over time. That is what this process is meant to do, make your research better as you move along.
2. When you get a new piece of information, use it to inform the next part of your process and refine the last. You should use each new finding or insight to refine your work and inform the next piece.
3. Engage your classmates and professors for guidance. You have access to incredible resources in these two populations, use them to help you along the way. And of course, be a resource to them as well. I can’t remember how many times I sought out a classmate who shared something insightful in class to find out more information. You are surrounded by smart, motivated people, who want you to succeed, actively use that support system.

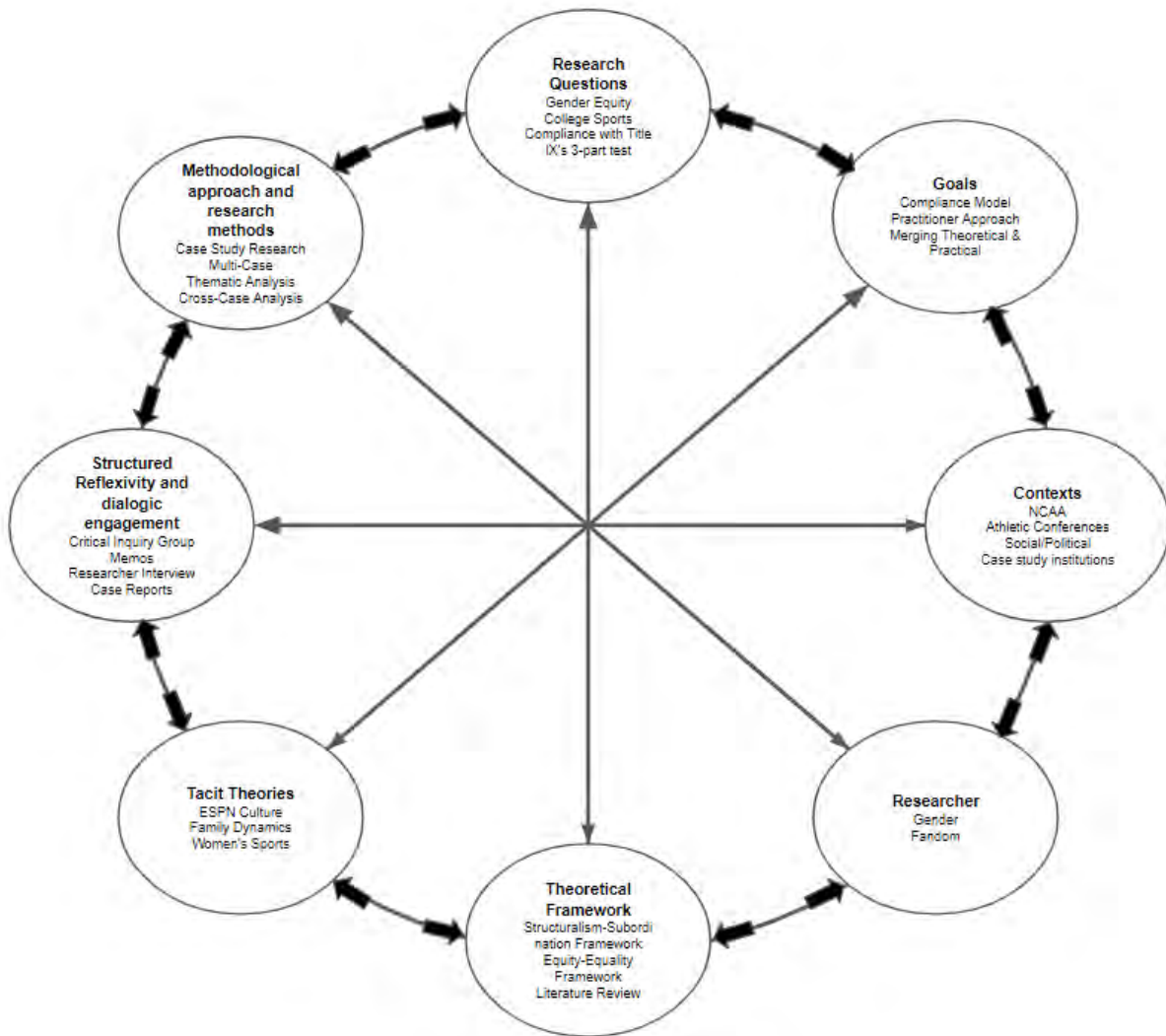
Parting Wisdom

My last bits of wisdom as you are embarking on this journey are meant to serve as things that I wish I had known at the beginning that I wanted to be sure others knew too.

1. First and foremost, love your topic. I cannot stress this enough. You are going to be spending a lot of time and investing a lot of energy in it, you should love it. That's not to say you won't be frustrated, tired and "over it" at times, but at the end of the day you should love it.
2. Second, use your classmates as a resource and be a resource to them. Although they aren't likely to know your topic as in-depth as you do, they can offer valuable insights, largely because they are not you. You can "stress test" your ideas, research questions, frameworks or just have a fresh set of eyes on your work. You should be the same for them as it only makes your own work stronger as well. Reciprocity is key.
3. Third, don't be afraid to ask questions. The old adage is true, there are no dumb questions. Ask all of your questions, in whatever manner you are comfortable doing so, just be sure to ask them. You'll find that once you give them air, they do get answered and the path gets that much more clear.
4. Fourth, don't be afraid to admit possible mistakes or confusions and ask for help mid-concern. No one is perfect and mistakes happen. Acknowledging those mistakes sooner rather than later can only make your work stronger. I had a setback towards the end of my dissertation that at first froze me and I didn't know what to do. It was only after I acknowledged the mistake and talked with my advisor and critical inquiry group that I could come up with a path forward. My work was better and stronger because of the help I received, even though in the moment I felt vulnerable fessing up.
5. Fifth, memos are your best friends. I cannot stress this enough. I wish I could go back and tell myself this at the very beginning of my journey to chart more at that stage. Documenting decision making, mistakes, rationales, conversations and anything else of even possible importance to your methods is invaluable when you get to the writing stage. Being able to refer to those documents and reflect on them makes your methods more specific and your dissertation stronger.
6. Sixth, know when to stop. This is especially true during your literature review. There is so much material out there, you will never read it all. Take that in. Knowing when you should stop and move on is extremely important. For me, I read about 2 months too long and it set me behind. I still had huge stacks of reading that I could have done but pulling more and more sources from more and more readings was a never-ending path. Get what

you need, cover your ground, trust yourself to call it when it's covered. Ask people if you can stop if you aren't sure.

Finally, and this may feel challenging, let yourself enjoy the ride! Parts will be smooth, others bumpy. By the end you will be tired, burnt out and just want to be done. But stop along the way and enjoy the moments of learning and connection. Those middle of the night texting sessions with your classmates about some obstacle or interesting article you found do matter. Those coffees with professors discussing your topic (and your passion for it) stay with you. Those classes with other really smart and engaged classmates continue to teach you. I can tell you that, looking back almost a year after defending, I miss it all. You will never have this moment in your life again, try to enjoy it.



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